**The Left-Handed Novelist**

*(70 pages of 200-character manuscript paper)*

Z's father trembled all over, gripped by an anxiety more intense than any he had felt in dreams.

The sun made the child's hair shimmer as it dropped his descendant from the highest point on earth into the lake below. The child, lovely even from behind, had never once looked back at his father. This was the father's only regret. The grassy field surrounding the lake, three bears wearing yellow dandelion shirts and red pansy pants with white hyacinth skin exposed—a mother, father, and offspring whose gender remained undetermined—hundreds of tulip hearts, the peaceful distribution of a sparse crowd that gave rest to the nervous system in this urban park's tranquility, all of this he was enjoying fully.

The child, who had been gazing only at the lake, finally revealed clear, bright eyes and looked at his father—while slowly sinking to the bottom of the lake. The father sat still and merely watched. Dominated by a passion to confirm the face that repeated his own weathered self in purity, he remained distant like all the other people in the park.

Though the child's face, revealing only truth, was unfamiliar, the father was content. The child was serene, and breathing seemed unnecessary. The city lake became vertical, endlessly sinking the child until the sun hung low over the residential complex on the far shore. The child still smiled while looking at his father, but flailed his arms and legs, swimming toward even deeper depths.

When the sun laid its weary body behind the earth and stretched out red yawns for a while, those who had lingered outside naturally began to long for home.

"Father, let's disappear home too. Like all the people in the park."

The child, sitting on a blue mat spread on the grass, was speaking while stretching to convey the pleasant fatigue of a holiday afternoon throughout his entire body. Whose descendant could that child be? Though the father felt confused by the unfamiliar appearance, he could soon be certain it was the same child who had disappeared into the lake.

After walking for five minutes and nearing home, the father could finally clearly imprint his son's face, able to recognize him instantly anywhere in the world. When he heard the neighboring couple whispering from their window, "The most affectionate father and son in our city are returning home hand in hand," the father felt complete satisfaction as a parent. It would have lasted a lifetime if his wife hadn't opened the door and expressed sighs and anger loud enough for all the neighbors to hear.

"How can a father who took out twins return home smiling like this with just one child!"

The wife looked at the child's father as if she would banish him from the house forever.

"If only this were a dream, as we all wish," the child's father was fervently hoping when his wife's vigorous shaking woke him from sleep.

According to the doctor, Z's mother, who was carrying one healthy baby boy, opened the curtains all the way so the sun could caress the father's mind and fully awaken him from his dream. The couple, in their fifteenth year of marriage, had visited an auspicious temple far from home for a hundred days straight to pray before conceiving their child—a temple where sacred energy had flowed for a thousand years.

The father, finding his vague anxiety from the dream suddenly amplified a thousandfold, wanted to sleep again. Rather than being a human who had belated prophetic dreams foretelling his child's unfortunate future, he wanted to become a dog that could dream any dream with equal consistency.

Z came to his parents without any physical defects, and Z's father and mother thanked all gods and beings, saying that having an ordinary child was a special joy they had never felt before in their lives.

As the first and last descendant of the household, Z grew up receiving more than twice the care and expectations of ordinary children. By his seventh birthday celebration, he sat with the sparkling eyes of a mature soul that seemed fourteen years old. Z's father, whose hair had become predominantly white over the past few years, silently prayed that from today onward, the child would eat ten meals daily, take ten walks, and grasp ten life lessons before sleep each day.

When Z unwrapped the package tied with silk ribbon and opened the white box about 50 centimeters wide, he found a stethoscope, five each of surgical scissors and forceps of different sizes and shapes, and two curved pipe-shaped items that seemed to require instruction manuals, all neatly arranged. Opening the zipper attached to the inside of the upper box revealed a white coat with Z's name embroidered on the chest. Though they were all half-scale silver plastic models, they were so precise that if someone suddenly collapsed right there, Z would have wanted to test their performance.

Upon examining the gift, Z hesitated between whether he should smile joyfully for his father, who was already showing satisfaction, or let out a sigh of disappointment for the sake of truth, hoping someone would say something.

"Son, what do you want to do when you grow up? Father has always wondered but waited until today. Now surely you have something to answer, don't you?"

Z's father spoke as if feeling light tension about confirming a scheduled agenda rather than anticipation for an unknown answer.

"I want to create stories. Stories that contain father, mother, neighbors, our lake park, and everyone in the world."

Even if he had only said this much, the father would have managed a bitter smile considering it was his son's birthday. But Z took the pen from the coat and spread the wrapping paper from the doctor's tool box all around the room, writing "novel" with his left hand.

"Son! Please say you'll write prescriptions. As father has always taught you, the left hand does nothing. In proper posture!"

Z's father tried to snatch the pen from the child's hand, but the child's left hand would never open, as if it had been matched with the pen since birth.

From the moment of birth, Z had always tried to touch his father's and mother's faces with his left hand, sucked only his left fingers to signal hunger, and clenched his left fist to show anger. Z's father nearly wept from unhappiness but ultimately overcame everything by remembering his parental duties.

Whenever the child extended his left hand, the parents stepped back; when he sucked his left fingers, they hid all edible things from sight; when he clenched his left fist, they oiled his palm and left him alone, going outside the gate. The child was clever enough to survive in the world, so when his father's patience and repeated efforts continued unwaveringly, he became right-handed—exactly like children who were right-handed from birth.

"I'll ask again on your next birthday. There's plenty of time until then, so both father and you must make an effort. Right?"

Z's father, determined that disappearing dreams would end today, pondered the concept of responsibility and past efforts while walking around the lake until the blue waves darkened and everyone returned home. Returning to his study, he picked up the books on child-rearing and training he had been reading. "How many more books, plans, and patience are needed? Or perhaps..."

Father always said that if one became a doctor, there would be nothing more to desire, but even becoming a lawyer would certainly mean success in life. And after Z visited his parents' home wearing a shining golden badge, he added that accountants also completely belonged to the category that guaranteed success.

Until ten years ago, only doctors and lawyers could have badges made of real gold. High-ranking civil servants, congressmen, and even the president could only have silver badges or badges that imitated gold with copper or alloys. The badges imitating gold looked so crude that no one except thieves in desperate circumstances would mistake them, so in practice only golden badges and silver badges were used, and people could recognize golden badges instantly from a distance. Accountants were now classified as a tribe that, along with doctors and lawyers, formed the foundation of the nation and society. Of course, high-ranking civil servants, congressmen, and presidents all possessed at least several of the three types of golden badges.

The accountant's badge was shaped like a calculator with clearly displayed on the LCD screen. The doctor's badge resembled a thick wallet with a stethoscope pressed against it. Lawyers' badges all featured scales, though the shapes varied slightly by role. A judge's badge showed two people with a threefold difference in build sitting on either side of the scales without any tilt. A prosecutor's badge depicted a person with fearsome facial scars and massive build looking with surprise at the prosecutor's office building on the opposite side. A defense attorney's badge showed one side empty and the other loaded with gold ingots. Unlike the judge's scales, those of prosecutors and defense attorneys were completely tilted to one side.

Every time Z came home, his father would shout loudly, "THE GOLDEN BADGE ACCOUNTANT HAS COME HOME!" so loudly that he felt obligated to present evidence to all the neighbors, and Z always came wearing his golden badge on his chest.

Whenever his father's laughter spread beyond the gate, Z couldn't laugh along because his left hand, resting uselessly and comfortably, seemed to be constantly pricked by something.

It was a Saturday morning more precious than gold. For Z, all Saturdays and Sundays were things he wouldn't trade to anyone for gold alone. Solemnly donning his most cherished pants, shirt, coat, gloves, and scarf from the center compartment of his wardrobe, Z felt like departing on a crusade to Jerusalem.

Z was dedicating ten Saturday mornings to a course at the city's cultural center called "Warmly Embracing Frozen Poetry to Pass It On to Spring." Fortunately, hundreds of poems that had been on the verge of frostbite, besides Z's efforts, had warmed enough in the hearts of the auditors to be passed on to summer.

This week too, Z sat with his left hand placed right next to his pen, listening to Michael von Lucifer's "Angel or Devil's Poetry" being recited for about thirty minutes. While people fell into sweet dreams with heavenly expressions, Z maintained the resolute spirit of a traveler lost and alone in hell, waiting to see if his right hand might fall into heaven's deep sleep. Just as his right hand's fingers seemed to curl halfway and droop limply, and Z was about to bring his left thumb and index finger to the pen, his right hand gripped the pen first with flawless posture like a new recruit who knows he must never lose his rifle, completely blocking all approaches.

Z had never once held a pen with his left hand. Life as a right-handed person was natural and efficient both as an accountant and in all daily activities. However, Z constantly felt the urge to write novels rising within him, and whenever this happened, his right hand would sneer while his left hand would leap around looking for a pen like a country believer invited by God, but the sneering right hand always completely blocked the left hand from the pen.

The left hand was a hope never realized but never lost, and when spring was walking with languid steps under some palm tree shade in the South Pacific, the moment came to send the poems to those reluctant to let them go.

At A Accounting Office where Z had worked for ten years, there were 31 accountants, and Z was the 16th-ranked accountant. According to the "A Accounting Corporation Fundamental Regulations," accountants' ownership percentages were determined by the following formula:

According to the formula, the difference in ownership increased as one moved from lower to higher ranks, but as long as there were four or more accountants, no single person could hold a majority stake.

With 31 accountants now, the figures were roughly: 1st place: 25%, 2nd place: 12%, 3rd place: 8.3%, 4th place: 6.2%, 5th place: 5%, 6th place: 4%, ..., 15th place: 1.66%, 16th place (Z): 1.55%, 17th place: 1.46%, ..., 31st place: 0.8%.

The ownership percentage meant not only decision-making power for important matters but also determined salary and the size of offices and chairs according to the ownership ratio. Chair sizes were limited to prevent them from becoming too large or small, since people's hip sizes couldn't differ that much.

Through this simple formula and incentive system, accountants never lost their desire to climb higher, and feeling the too-obvious differences, they naturally divided themselves into upper and lower groups of similar peers. As the business prospered and the number of accountants increased, concerns about arbitrary tyranny by the upper few decreased.

The accountants at A Accounting Office could always act like machines working with passion. Their respect for the upper few accountants was as full as that of priests. The larger the scale became, the stronger their belief that the accounting office belonged to everyone, making them desire to review more ledgers faster.

Almost all accounting offices in the world followed this formula and policy. The total sum of revenue and capital handled by accounting offices grew endlessly, suggesting that the world's happiness was infinitely increasing and accumulating in warehouses. The total sum of costs and liabilities also grew endlessly, suggesting that we were making increasingly bold sacrifices unavoidable for happiness, and that sins were growing faster than the dead in the deep darkness of land and sea.

Z found it fortunate and satisfying that he, unable to shake off such thoughts while looking at the accountants' golden badges, had remained steadily at 16th rank for five years.

The 31 accountants belonged to two groups, "The High" and "The Future"—consisting of the noble ones from ranks 1 to 15 and the future noble ones from ranks 17 to 31. People in each group understood each other well through similar salaries, chairs, and suits, and could steadily share bonds and joy through continuous celebratory events and commemorative parties on weekdays and holidays alike. Regarding the other group, they exchanged occasional gifts of respect, admiration, affection, and charity, achieving sufficient overall harmony in A Accounting Office. In Z's opinion, this was the ideal they pursued.

Since rank 16 was the balance point between the two groups of 15 noble ones and 15 future noble ones, it seemed destined to become what people commonly call the "odd one out" in games, but according to the office's tradition since founding, it became the balance point. The office had always maintained an odd number of accountants, and the person at the exact center rank became the balance point by doing nothing and staying still, thereby easing tension between both sides and creating slight distance between them. Z spent most weekday evenings and holidays hiking in mountains and fields, visiting museums and art galleries, reading books on various subjects that sparked his curiosity, and meeting people who weren't accountants, especially childhood friends. These would have been impossible without maintaining the balance of 16th place. If the accounting office's prosperity, which had been somewhat stagnant, resumed and grew to 33, 35, or more accountants, Z thought he might need to deliberately reduce his work efficiency to maintain the balance point.

The 15th-ranked Accountant A would leave the most comfortable, refreshing, stylish, and excellent "Rest Lounge" with the best view in the office—with its carefully bonsaied trees, natural leather sofa large enough for a cow to sit comfortably, subtly fragrant wood walls and floor-to-ceiling windows between them—grab a cup of coffee, and walk past it all as if he had discovered heaven outside the office, which sometimes made A feel unpleasant and angry when he saw Z. Z should either hover near the noble ones trying to escape 16th place or console himself by associating with those young friends while preparing for the future, but Z was living irresponsibly like a mystic. A had worked so passionately to earn the title of noble one and was doing his best to become more noble. A sometimes wondered if Z might be plotting to irresponsibly break down everyone's boundaries and suddenly surpass him and those above in one stroke. In any case, Z was a thorn in A's side.

Z thought of A as his treeline where his own photosynthesis was safely protected. Z hoped A would find peace even if he had to give A all his excess oxygen, but when they worked as a team conducting audits, A seemed to lose that peace more than at other times.

"Accountants are people who discover only facts through numbers, Z. Are you writing novels now? A suitable title for the reports you write would be something like 'The Truth of Fixed Assets That Disappeared in One Night.' Go ahead and create a very realistic, interesting, and moving novel. But you won't get approval from me, your superior. Then you won't get anyone's approval at A Accounting Office. Accountant or novelist? Make your choice."

Z wanted to disappear outside the door and walk for a while. He wanted to hold warm coffee in his hands, climb a gentle hill, sit on one of the benches beside the trees, absorb sunlight with his maximum surface area, and look at the small forest and the city beyond.

Giving A a temporary answer with one second of silence, Z was slowly leaving the conference room, passing through the Rest Lounge where many accountants were enjoying peace with smiles, about to disappear outside. When even one arm was about to disappear, A mobilized overflowing adrenaline to drag Z back inside the door and bound both of Z's arms tightly with his own hands.

"Write novels, I tell you. Go in right now and continue the novel."

"You're right."

Z felt a subtle stirring from the center of his body to the tip of his left hand, which then turned into a fierce waterfall. He shook off A's right hand and recorded a short story on A's jaw. A's jaw developed small depressions in various places as if vertically stabbed with irregularly shaped lumber, and the red and purple bruises in the depressed areas evoked traces of volcanic eruptions. A even shed a few tears in front of the noble accountants watching. The accountants scattered to their respective rooms in silence with expressions of dreaming unbelievable dreams.

The head accountant, whom Z was seeing directly for the first time in a year, maintained the composure and dignity of first rank while explaining the decision to Z.

"Since you used your left hand, there's no choice but to see it this way. If you had swung your fist ten times or fewer with your right hand, we wouldn't need to go this far. About ten punches don't greatly affect a person. I'm sure Z understands well. A's physical wounds will heal in a month, but the emotional humiliation will remain and torment him for life. Everyone knows it's common knowledge that using the left hand for violence is the final method used when one intends to extremely humiliate the opponent. A few years ago, the point that 'only the right hand is valid for official acts and procedures, while the left hand is officially invalid' was even codified as customary constitutional law."

Z knew this well too. In Constitutional Court Decision Record No. 7211, the decision on the existence of this customary constitutional law was documented in writing to bind all state institutions and citizens, ensuring that right-handed customs were established on paper for anyone to easily confirm and use as evidence.

"I agree with the dismissal decision. I will not raise any objections at all."

Z thought the method of dismissal might indeed be just and appropriate. The anxiety A felt and the humiliation that made him shed tears, or the excessive physical shock, shouldn't be something only A had to endure. A would find some comfort through Z's dismissal.

Z felt relieved. He had already been thinking it was time to leave. Someone had pushed Z's back as he wavered in hesitation and confusion.

Last winter, while sweating to obtain even one line of novel surrounded by poetry's lovers, what made our students most excited was news of the Literary Purity Act's enactment. "From January 1st of xx year, only poetry is permitted in literature. Therefore, no other form of literary writing should be produced or expressed, surprise inspections can be conducted even in the most remote mountain huts, and violators will receive unbearable punishment." That was the gist.

Everyone uniformly criticized by pounding tables on behalf of the lawmakers who participated in the bill and key figures from related major institutions, but when palms and even tables became quite warm, they also added some praise for poetry being chosen as literature's representative.

Z recalled the phenomenon of paper becoming increasingly scarce. Accountants these days could hardly see paper tax invoices. Though plants including trees were still thriving in the world, and research labs and factories seemed capable of mixing rolling stones with other materials to create new substances to replace paper, somehow only cries to save paper were heard everywhere. Yet people who claimed to do literature inevitably wrote on paper, then seemed to write once more on top of it, then needed yet another piece of paper. Their proportion was about that of the solar system's gathering among stars belonging to the galaxy, but their paper consumption seemed enough to slightly shake the galaxy. Poets, destined to live the shortest lives, might have immortal descendants while continuing to receive paper's comfort.

The wealth accumulated by an accountant of ten years was considerable. Excluding the small amount needed for departure, he gave the rest to his parents, saying he would live in a distant foreign country for several years and didn't know when he would return. When the only son said this, the father couldn't hide both sadness and satisfaction. It was an amount that made him feel and express the pride and reward of having successfully raised his son. The mother, with winter settled on her face, would be comforted by the father. Z had no choice.

A ray of light entered the cave, making his legs much warmer, so he opened his eyes. At a distance equal to this height, he could see the massive mountain shape where asteroid 5539 Annefrank seemed to have crashed and frozen. The coziness inside the cave felt even more grateful. The moment waiting for dawn reminded him of the wonder of souls who received an unforeseeable sun on the day they were born on Earth. When the surroundings became full of gentle warmth, Z took a sip of goat's milk and came outside.

Five steps from the entrance, he saw the river spread below the cliff. A quiet stream flowed freely along its curving lines, and glaciers with black rock masses on their shoulders were following the stream slowly, as if timed to some stopped clock.

He had seen sheep and goats a few days ago, but hadn't seen people for a hundred days. A thousand meters down lived dozens of people like Z who lived in caves, and another thousand meters down revealed a small plain with several villages.

This was Z's thousandth and first day living in the cave. Z walked the winding path around the cliff. Spring came to the Himalayas without fail, dressing the world where only black stones and snow had remained in cheerful clothes of flowers and trees lying flat.

Watching the sun rest its end slightly on the giant mountain's shoulder and yawn, Z stood with eyes closed in front of the cave.

When darkness completely covered the Himalayas' white torso, Z lit an oil lamp that someone from the village had brought. Every day, Z listened to Scheherazade's stories until she wished to stop, then fell asleep, hoping that someday during the thousand and one days, his left hand might gain freedom.

Though today was the thousand and second day, his left hand still couldn't grasp the pen, and his right hand, as increasingly often, merely pointed below the clouds in a daze. Z wasn't discouraged. Each day, transparent energy gradually filled his body, and except for meditation times at dawn and dusk, he would happily think up dozens of possible continuing stories out of curiosity about what would come next.

When the thousand and one nights of stories ended, Z approached the cave entrance and looked outside. Giants who seemed to have come from outside Earth were also extinct in the darkness. Thousands of stars that knew they could shine by themselves were whispering that even the Himalayas were like dust. Bright, warm energy began to flow and swirl from Z's head and heart to his legs and fingertips. Then a voice full of wisdom and courage came from inside the cave.

"Please tell me tomorrow's story."

Turning around, he saw the figure of a beautiful woman as graceful and cheerful as her voice.

"No one did so after the king listened to stories for a thousand and one nights plus one more night. Most were those who enjoyed brief but intense joy for a few days then left, and others left without even hearing stories through the third night. Some of them returned only after ten thousand nights had passed.

You seem to know that other worlds beginning outside this world are also true. Come, tell me the next story. I'll hardly be able to sleep from curiosity."

The woman smiled with beautiful radiance that seemed visible only outside the world and walked into the inner wall of the cave, disappearing. Soon the wall sparkled like a mirror, emitting light to reflect Z.

Z could clearly see himself reflected in the mirror. Z's left hand had been severed completely above the wrist, the flesh and bone hardened into a blunt shape. All memories came flooding back.

In childhood, on one of his birthdays, when he couldn't overcome his overwhelming feelings and declared he would create stories, his father momentarily endured grief and bewilderment, then asked the same question the next year. Z vigorously raised his left hand and shouted "novelist" loud enough for all the neighbors in the world to hear.

His father asked two more times, "What do you really want to become?" and Z gave the unchanging answer, hoping even the most distant stars could hear, forgetting his fear.

His father took an axe from the deepest part of the closet and severed Z's left wrist. Z, who remained unconscious for a while, woke up after three days and forgot the pain of his left hand. After that, no one spoke about Z's left hand anymore.

Z understood that it was no lie that his right hand appeared as his left hand in the mirror's reflection, and slowly walked toward the mirror.

Swami Kumar was an ascetic of the Himalayas. Having completed two periods of secluded practice, he was taking a hundred-day outing. A thousand meters above the cave where he had been staying, there was a cave that, while not easy to inhabit and thus rarely occupied by ascetics, had occasionally housed a few ascetics over the centuries. He had decided to conduct his third thousand-day practice there and began climbing the mountain at dawn, enjoying the warm spring sun.

When the sun reached the center of the sky, he arrived at the cave entrance and encountered an ascetic just leaving the cave. The ascetic spoke incomprehensible words, pointed below the clouds, and descended the mountain. Though his left wrist was severed, he easily descended using his right hand to grip rocks like a goat.

Entering the cave, he found the interior as bright as the outside, and when he went to the very back, the wall sparkled like a mirror. Amazingly, the ascetic who had just descended the mountain was writing something inside the mirror. He looked peaceful like a saint who had reached a high spiritual level, appearing to recall many stories and write them down. Opposite to the one who had left, his right wrist was severed and he was writing with his left hand.

*The End*